

Conference on Nonviolence and Just Peace (Rome, April 11-13, 2016)
Personal Statement
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Two dimensions of my experience as a theologian have shaped my perspective on war and peace. The first is my role as a scholar and teacher in North America since the 1980s. The second is my experience since 2005 as a scholar member of the Catholic Peacebuilding Network, sponsored by Catholic Relief Services and the University of Notre Dame.

I have taught at a Jesuit University, Boston College, since the late 1970s. Obviously, therefore, I have been thinking about these issues in light of the options, policies, and debates carried on within a “superpower,” one that largely has been spared the scourge of military aggression within its borders but has itself wielded armed force multiple times around the globe. During this time I regularly taught a graduate course that includes the just war theories of thinkers like Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. Meanwhile, the US has been engaged in the Vietnamese-American war, the Cold War, the Gulf War and invasions of Iraq. In the US, since World War II, just war theory is solidly entrenched in “mainstream” Catholic interpretations of armed force. Yet this era also saw resistance to war, particularly to military actions of the US government. Publicly visible Catholic pacifists included Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton (a qualified pacifist), and the Berrigan brothers. However, overall, just war theory has been the dominant paradigm of the U.S. Catholic Church, as reflected in our bishops’ 1983 and 1993 pastoral letters.

In 1994 I wrote a book on just war and pacifism that did not reject just war theory but expressed dissatisfaction with the just war theories of Augustine and Aquinas as representative of the tradition. If Jesus embodies God’s reign in his teaching and ministry, and if that reign is even now breaking into and transforming social relationships, should the practical possibility of nonviolence be taken more seriously than these figures—and the tradition as a whole--seem to do?

In 2005, I joined the CPN, which is primarily an international activist network working in conflict zones. I was one of several scholars invited to contribute to a book exploring a theology of peace. In connection with this project, I was privileged to attend international meetings of scholars and practitioners in Bogota, Colombia and Bujumbura, Burundi. My experience with the CPN greatly enlarged and expanded my perspective on war and peace.

The CPN introduced me to an international context, and to the reality of ongoing intra-state and cross-border conflicts in many parts of the “two thirds world.” Religious activists take risks every day to end violence, prevent violence, and diminish the harm of ongoing violence in regions and local communities. I met many, many “peacebuilders”—including community workers, Catholic women religious, CRS staff, and clergy and bishops--who work across political, ethnic, and religious divisions to embody the gospel and increase the reign of God, with the help

of the risen Jesus and the Holy Spirit. I visited their communities and saw their work first hand.

My perspective on “just war and pacifism” changed insofar as I realized that the theoretical debate over which is the most reasonable, just or even Christian model is not the key issue for people “on the front lines.” The key issue is living out of Jesus’ example concretely and day by day, building bridges with others willing to take risks. Peacebuilders bring together parties in conflict, joining people in their common humanity, in respect and compassion, in hope for a better society, and in the need to change immediate conditions of danger and death. These people do not debate “just war vs. pacifism.” They simply get to work for peace with justice. Often underappreciated but absolutely key to peacebuilding is the work of women, so often the main change agents as they struggle to provide for daily life and to network for safety and security in their communities.

Through the CPN, I realized more profoundly that conversion and the ability to see the world in a different way are crucial to building peaceful and just societies. Conversion of hearts, minds, and everyday practices is a huge and difficult task and goes far beyond reasons and arguments. It really requires a different imagination, rooted in concrete experiences of reaching out and trying to live together.

As I look forward to our time together in Rome, I am especially conscious of the intransigence of evil in our world. Every attempt to use political means to bring about justice seems tangled in unintended bad consequences. Yet I am encouraged by the signs of transformation to which the work of committed peacebuilders witnesses. As I prepare a new edition of my war and peace book, I am making the dimension of Christian peacebuilding primary.

Our conference in Rome will be a wonderful opportunity to think with others about the commitment to nonviolence and to the creation of just and peaceful societies that is embodied in Catholic thought and action. I hope both to gain more intellectual clarity, and to work with everyone present to broaden and deepen the practical impact of our ideals.